

## THE MURDER IN LAFAYETTE PLACE. A STORY OF OLD NEW YORK.

BY EDGAR FAWCETT, AUTHOR OF "AN AMBITIOUS WOMAN," "THE HOUSE AT HIGH BRIDGE," "TINKLING CYMBALS," "A GENTLEMAN OF LEISURE," "RUTHERFORD," ETC.

CONCLUDED FROM PAGE 50.



### CHAPTER V.

ROVOST'S departure left Lady Hubert and her remaining guest free to begin a conversation on purely personal matters.

The prince was young, with dark lustrous eyes and a clear-cut high-bred face, rendered more striking by the olive complexion.

"You nearly threw me off my balance," he said, in somewhat excited French.

"How?" asked Lady Hubert. "By introducing you as 'Prince Monti'?"

"Yes."

"But you are Prince Monti."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. It's my caprice, Carlo. You know I could have discharged you months ago, as my courier, after I had completed my travels in Styria and elsewhere. But I preferred to do otherwise. I brought you quietly with me to America, where the valet-de-place and the courier are not needed—at least, not to an American, like myself."

"Truly," murmured the person whom she had now deprived of his princely dignities and called "Carlo." "But—" He paused, shrugging his shoulders and making an upward gesture with both hands. "Ah, you are an extraordinary woman!" he pursued, fixing his dark eyes upon her face. "You wish me to remain 'Prince Monti,' then?"

"Yes."

She spoke quite as if she were addressing a servant—which this man had indeed thus far been to her, and nothing more. He was of fairly good Italian birth. He had the manners of an Italian gentleman. No one, in those comparatively remote New York days, would have suspected him of being anything else.

"You are henceforth 'the Prince Monti,' my dear Carlo," she went on, with the faintest little

smile about her lips and the same admirable calm which she had shown during her interview with Bleeker Provost. "You have great estates in Tuscany; you are traveling for your health and your diversion. You will entertain here in New York; you will dazzle people."

She rose now, and Carlo the courier rose too, startled by the pallor which had come into her face. The next words that she spoke were in an altered tone—colder and much more emphatic.

"There is one person whom I want you to charm—to fascinate, Carlo, if you can," she said.

She laid her hand on his arm and looked meaningfully, fervently, into his eyes.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"The wife of that man who has just left us. He has a wife, Carlo. I have seen her; she is very lovely—a blonde. You like blondes—you have told me."

Carlo looked at her in bewilderment.

"Lady Hubert," he exclaimed, "you mean that—that you hate the—the gentleman who was here just now?"

She gave a short chill laugh and sank into her seat again.

"I mean," she said, "that you are the Prince Monti, with a very large income at your disposal. You have chanced to come here just at the same time as myself. I know all about you. I endorse you. I myself am endorsed; they will believe anything that I tell them. It's a very little innocent sort of place, this New York, after our Paris, our Vienna. To-morrow, you will receive the first installment of your income, mon prince, provided you consent to my proposal. You once said that you would do anything I asked you. It was that night when you made a fool of yourself in the Austrian Tyrol, and were nearly discharged because of your folly. You found out then that I was a woman with a heart of marble. You told me so. I liked the compliment and did not discharge you. Do you understand now, Carlo, what I wish you to do?"

"Yes," he said, after a little pause. "You want me to bring disgrace upon a woman you hate, and you want it because this woman is the wife of the man we have both just seen."

The ball of Lady Hubert Averly was a splendid success. All the old Knickerbocker families sent their young and social members to it. Prince Monti appeared at the side of the beautiful hostess, as a new surprise and a new subject for future ardent gossip. Bleecker Provost came with his wife. Lady Hubert made no distinction between any of her guests. To all, she was the perfection of courtesy and sweetness.

The prince rapidly became a lion. He had just the manners to please women. Lady Hubert had vouched for his being an undoubted prince; this was ample enough guarantee. Once or twice during the evening, Lady Hubert found herself close to Bleecker Provost.

"Did my coming surprise you?" he at length murmured to her, very low and with a peculiar expression.

"It gave me much pleasure," she answered, her smile no less inscrutable than kindly.

"Pleasure?" he repeated.

She parried the question that his exclamation seemed to convey. "Your wife is charming," she said. "I hope we shall be good friends."

He bit his lip; embarrassment, perplexity, suspicion, alarm, all appeared to meet in the look with which he searched her face. "Do you mean that?" he said.

"Implicitly."

There was a pause. He was still gazing at her as though he would read her soul. He had forgotten all the shame which at first she had inspired in him.

"Do you, then," he presently asked, pausing after each word, "forgive what once occurred between you and myself? I—I know that this is a strange, an insolent, query for me to put. And yet you—you somehow force me to put it. You make me feel that you are large and fine enough in heart and spirit even—yes, that is the right phrase—to forgive the past."

She bowed her head. "I forgive it," she answered, wondering how a man like him could credit her falsehood.

He at once stretched out his hand. She took it. She was glad that, as he pressed it, her glove and his own prevented their fingers from coming into contact. But even then she inwardly shrank from the touch as if it were that of a serpent.

"You said, you know," he went on, with a melodious fall in his voice that reminded her of arts he had practiced before, now loathsome to

her, "you said, Lady Hubert, that you hoped my wife and yourself would be good friends. I could not mistake such a—a suggestion. Or, at least, I thought that I could not, and I apparently have not. We are to be good friends, then—you and I?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"It is very noble of you. It is even more than noble. I thank you as no words can fitly evidence. You will find my wife a very sweet woman."

"I have already found her so," was the reply.

"But not, like yourself, a great woman," pursued Bleecker. "Great women are rare."

"Rarer than you dream," she said to her own thoughts. And then some other guest claimed her attention as the really sumptuous ball progressed in its festivity.

## CHAPTER VI.

THAT winter proved an exceptional one for the New York of that period, in the way of elegant festivities and costly entertainments.

Prince Monti hired a mansion on South Washington Square, and gave several superb entertainments.

The prince had become extremely popular, and he stood forth in society a romantic and most interesting figure. He was the soul of all the aristocratic gayeties, and Lady Hubert was his constant associate and coadjutor. She had become the intimate friend of Bleecker Provost's wife, who had grown openly to express the sincerest fondness for her. Emily had caused not a little gossip by the attentions which she permitted from the prince, although the general verdict had resolved itself into a statement that the prince admired her considerably more than Mrs. Provost admired him.

Bleecker was, in the meantime, seen everywhere with his wife. A number of families, who had not shown such hospitable tendency for years, gave parties and receptions in their quiet commodious dwellings.

Lady Hubert had, for a few weeks past, lost the vivacity which had formerly distinguished her. She was still intimate with Mrs. Bleecker Provost; indeed, there were occasions when she would permit no one except this new friend to see or hold converse with her. Illness was offered as an excuse for her absence from not a few routs and merry-makings.

When the Suydams of Pike Street had their amusing Lady Washington surprise-party, which was not really a surprise at all to its recipients, Lady Hubert's non-attendance caused a good deal of annoyed comment.

This party proved the grand success of the whole season, and one of its most diverting incidents was Mrs. Provost's making that poor adorable prince gallop through a Virginia reel, which he insisted on treating as a cotillion in spite of all explanations.

Bleecker was there, and conducted himself as blithesomely as anybody. Perhaps he danced with a somewhat lighter spring because of Lady Hubert's absence. He had never wholly recovered from the severe shock he had experienced on meeting her again so unexpectedly.

"You have become very fond of your new friend, I hear," he said, one day, to his wife.

They had chanced to meet in the large lower hall. Emily was just coming in from a drive, and her husband was going out for an afternoon stroll along what was then called the "fashionable side" of Broadway. The carriage which had a minute ago rolled from the door, bringing Emily home, contained two occupants—Lady Hubert and the Prince Monti. The prince had assisted Emily to alight, and Lady Hubert had shown her face in farewell at the carriage-window.

Emily flushed most unwontedly as her husband thus addressed her. "Which friend?" she asked.

"Oh, Lady Hubert," answered Bleecker, lightly enough. "I saw the prince help you out of the carriage just now. I happened to be looking from one of the upper windows." He laughed here. "Oh, no, I assure you that I did not allude to him. I had no doubt that he, in a certain way, was your very good friend. There's hardly an attractive woman in New York society whom he hasn't managed to make like him."

Bleecker would as soon have suspected Trinity Church steeple of lowering itself ten or twenty feet at midnight, when there was nobody in Wall Street or thereabouts to witness this extraordinary proceeding, as he would have imagined his wife committing the least impropriety when the daylight of full publicity did not chance to be cast upon her conduct. One of the most monotonous qualities about Emily, as he had always argued, was her inflexible morality. He was fully convinced that she no longer possessed the least wifely love for him. He would have been willing to admit that she had fathomed his frivolous nature some time ago. But he felt so absolutely certain regarding her stanch loyalty to her marriage-vows, under all conceivable stress of temptation, that even to give this subject more than momentary reflection would have seemed for him like the most aimless waste

of time. And Emily, passing upstairs, was meanwhile in the act of saying to her own thoughts:

"I am not the first neglected wife who has forgotten what they call 'the proprieties.' If I should take some desperate step, it would have one unchanging consolation for me—I should inflict a punishment upon the man who so heartlessly deceived me by marrying me for my fortune alone."

### CHAPTER VII.

The secret of Lady Hubert's indisposition is easily told. She had come to these shores with a plain revenge to accomplish. News had long ago been imparted to her of Bleecker Provost's marriage. Her plan of action with regard to Carlo, her late courier, had been at first vague and indeterminate enough. But, afterward, all had made for her a very easy sort of presentment. She had spuriously created her adherent Prince Monti before she had been aware just what person Bleecker had married and just what matrimonial relations existed between himself and Emily.

But now she had no further intelligence to obtain. She had studied Emily closely. At first she had set herself deliberately to fascinate Bleecker's wife, and had succeeded. Her foreign experience, her perfect command of nicety, diplomacy, and all felicitous resource of similar description, had made Emily admire her as a woman gifted and accomplished beyond her own possible sphere of equipment. And then Emily had told herself that she had discovered something better and more valuable in Lady Hubert.

It was at this period of their acquaintanceship that she, who had crossed the ocean for the one relentless purpose of seeking to destroy Bleecker Provost's wife, found her own conscience rising up against her with a sharp attitude of mandate and veto.

She had thought it all over very carefully in England, just before her departure for New York.

"Of course," she had mused, "the woman he has married may be an incorrigible saint. If so, every degree of caste that I can confer upon a man of multiplex cleverness and strong personal charm, like Carlo, will prove thoroughly futile in its results. He can never win her to desert her fireside—and her husband. But, if she prove a woman of weak calibre, of insecure principles—and, most of all, if she prove a woman discontented with the nuptial lot that a wretch like Bleecker Provost has forced upon her—then, beyond a doubt, I shall be certain of my complete vengeance."

It had not been long before the intimacy between Emily and Lady Hubert had revealed the disillusion of the former, with regard to her husband. Emily told her new friend everything—her shattered hopes, her ruined ideal, her unspeakable disappointment. Lady Hubert had listened, but with none of the satisfaction she had anticipated. Emily's narration had pierced her with pity. She had assured herself that the heart in her breast was dead, and now she found it beating with compassionate sympathy for a fellow-creature, and this fellow-creature she had plotted to ruin!

In spite of herself, she had grown to love Emily. She knew that this love might imperil the consummation of her revenge. She struggled against it, day by day. Sometimes she fancied that it might conquer her, and that she would fling away all opportunity to strike a supreme retaliatory blow at the man who had been her own merciless enemy. Again, she rebelled hotly in opposition to these better visitant impulses.

But, at the same time, she had fired, so to speak, the slow match. Carlo, at first her paid minion, was now the rather self-contained opposite. She had clad him with powers which he proposed to enjoy somewhat despotically. More than once, of late, she had seen in him a disposition to show an uncompromising revolt. Again and again she had observed this.

"Your attentions," at last she said to him, "are causing great remark."

"I know it," he answered. "And, as you see, she permits them. There is something in that. It gives me encouragement. You may deal your vengeful stroke sooner than you think."

She looked at him keenly and thoughtfully for an instant. Then she said, as if with much deliberation :

"Suppose I should find myself unwilling to deal any vengeful stroke whatever."

"How is this?" he said, starting. His face clouded, and his dark eyes began to glitter. "I should like to think that you are in jest," he added.

She threw back her head a little haughtily, as if remembering that, although a large community of people might have pronounced him a prince, he and she were still servant and mistress. "And what," she asked him, "if I were not in jest?"

"Why, then I should simply laugh at you," he replied, with a sudden angry fierceness, "for having imagined that I would stand your attempt to make a fool of me. Don't deceive

yourself for a moment with the idea that you can do this. If something makes you want to desert your colors now, something makes me want to stick all the closer to mine."

"I see," she said, huskily. "You are in love—or think you are—with Mrs. Bleecker Provost."

"I don't think that I am in love," he said. "You know that you are?" she asked, with a ring of sternness in her voice.

"Yes, I know that." He had grown pale, and there was a drawn look about his lips that she had never before seen there.

Lady Hubert stared at the floor for a good minute. "Emily Provost is a woman of fine qualities—of great natural honor," she at length said.

Carlo gave a laugh full of hostile satire. "Ah, so you have fallen in love with her too!" he exclaimed.

"I have grown to respect her," Lady Hubert replied.

"I understand what you mean by that," he shot back, his voice charged both with challenge and sarcasm. "You mean that you regret your whole scheme!"

He abruptly rose from his chair and advanced toward her. They had been sitting together in the drawing-room of the Lafayette Place dwelling. His chair tottered beneath him from the forceful impetus he employed in rising.

"If you do regret it," he pursued, now standing close at her side, "you must bear in mind that I am not your mere servile dupe."

He had been speaking in French, as he always spoke to her. His nostrils quivered with rage, and the fleet fluent words of the extraordinarily expressive tongue he used leaped pell-mell from his lips.

"Have I ever said you were?" she asked, recoiling from him.

"You say it now—or mean it. It is the same. You wish me to give up what has become my passionate hope."

"Your—your passionate hope?" she faltered. Her face grew very pale as she thus spoke. "Carlo," she cried, impetuously, "I—I have watched Emily closely! My own evil work has sped with you till I feel as if there were no averting its horrid consequences. And I wish to avert them—"

"Ah, you do!" he interrupted.

"Listen," she hurried on: "I desired a great revenge. You don't know what my motive was; but, if ever revenge was justifiable, I believe that mine could be thus named. Still, I am now repentant of all past bitter resolves. I see in

your look that you would say Bleecker Provost once terribly wronged me. Well, that is true—I grant that. But his wife never did me a wrong. And I sought to strike at him through her. But she, the very creature whom I had fixed upon as the instrument of my vengeance, has turned the object of my love."

"You have grown tender and poetic!" he sneered.

"Oh, Carlo, she is so pure, so neglected by him! Listen to me: I have made you Prince Monti, with your thousands to spend in lavish way. I will do more for you: I will give you a handsome competence for the rest of your life, if you will—"

"If I will prove myself your groveling slave," he broke in, at this point. His black eyes blazed as he caught her arm. "I cared for you once," he went on, still holding her fast; "or, at least, I thought that I cared. You repulsed me. But I see now that I never loved any woman except this one—Emily Provost. She will desert her home and her husband for the love that I shall offer her."

"Oh, Carlo!" Lady Hubert gasped.

"You must not come between us now. I see that you want to come between us. But it is too late. You have trifled with fate, my beautiful sorceress. You have but one part to play—silence. Emily will go abroad with me in a little time. Do not dare to prevent her. If you do—" He paused here, and his face was one fervid testimony of threat and passion. "If you do, I—I should be capable of—yes, of killing you, for the rôle you have made me act and the treachery you have sprung upon me!"

As he pronounced the last words of this severed declaration, he withdrew his clasp from Lady Hubert's arm and rushed precipitately out of the room. Soon afterward, Lady Hubert heard the violent clang of the outer front door—a sound which meant that he had left the house.

She sank into a chair and covered her face. The futility of her own revenge thrilled and horrified her; love had defeated it. She loved Emily Provost, instead of hating her as Bleecker's wife, instead of being willing to crush her, through the effort to cast shame upon him.

When she thought of Carlo's insolence, her lip curled.

"What if I went to Emily," she mused, "and told her the full truth?"

No, she presently decided; that would indeed be treachery. But there might be no chance, after all, of Emily's succumbing to the "Prince Monti's" persuasions.

For a long time, Lady Hubert sat where the

enraged Carlo had left her, pierced with repentance and wrapped in reflections. At last, she reached this determination: she would never disclose the real truth about Carlo unless urged to do so by a final desperate exigency.

#### CHAPTER VIII.

MARCH had now been put to blustering flight and early April had brought a few days of sunny blandness. The afternoon was pleasant for an airing, and the hour was but a little past three o'clock.

Lady Hubert ordered her carriage and drove to the Provost residence. Her idea was to secure Emily for a drive out into the country, if possible; but, on reaching the house, word was given her that Emily was not at home.

She ordered her coachman to drive her out as far as Bloomingdale and past the very homestead which reminded her of so much girlish joy and of the one supreme anguish that had afterward fallen on her life.

The big, square, prim house was still standing. Tears filled her eyes as she looked on it. Those tears seemed to do her good. They were the first she had shed in a longer time than she liked to realize. Through all these recent years, her burning sense of infamous betrayal had dried the sources of such emotion. She found herself wondering that she could ever have been so inflexible, so hard, as to cross the ocean for the purpose which had dominated her very life.

Before she had passed again beyond the limits of the city, people had ceased to stare at the luxurious rarity of her private carriage, with its two men on the outer box; for night had fallen, soft and full-starred, holding a prophecy of a morrow of almost unseasonable clemency.

She had been assailed by dread and doubt concerning Emily. What if, before morning, Carlo should have tempted her friend into some madness? Her carriage finally drew up at her Lafayette Place home. The footman jumped from his box, rang the bell, and then came to open the door of the vehicle for her to descend.

This little evidence of prosperity had a positively unique suggestiveness in those days. A few passers paused, dark as it was, and watched to see what magnificent personage would issue from a carriage of this aristocratic and exceptional kind.

But one passer did not pause. She was hurrying straight onward. Lady Hubert's foot, however, had touched the pavement just as the light of a near lamp struck the woman's lowered face. She was plainly dressed, to the verge of shabbiness. But Lady Hubert swiftly recognized

her, and hastened after her, saying, in clear vibrant tones : "Emily, Emily!"

The speeding figure came to a stand-still ; and then the two stood and looked at each other in the dimness.

"Emily," pursued Lady Hubert, "where are you going, alone in the streets after dark, like this—and dressed as you are? Answer me. What does it mean?" And she seized the hand of Bleecker Provost's wife, holding it tensely.

Emily appeared wofully confused. "I—I have an—errand," she stammered. "Let me go, please, Lady Hubert. I—"

"You must not go—you shall not!" the other broke in.

A flash of indignation seemed to sweep, uncharacteristically enough, across Emily's gentle face. "Why not?" she questioned, struggling to withdraw her hand. "You know that I have many affairs of charity. There is a reason for my stealing out quietly this evening, as I am doing. It is still quite early. Please do not detain me. I—I will see you to-morrow, and then I—I will perhaps explain everything."

"You will explain to-night," came Lady Hubert's swift significant reply. "You will explain to me whether or not you are leaving your home forever. You will let me know whether or not that little satchel which you carry there, half hidden beneath your cloak, contains your most precious jewels. You will tell me, Emily Provost, whether you are or are not meaning ever again to return home!"

Lady Hubert spoke these words at a sort of wild venture. But, before she had fully pronounced them, she saw by the countenance of Emily that they had touched upon the sad and fatal truth. And then, in another instant, Emily had torn her hand away.

"What is all to you?" she exclaimed. "I am wretched, as you know. He cares for me. If I go abroad, I shall live another, happier, freer life. He is the very soul of honor—you told me something like that, once, yourself. Besides, I shall always be above want. My husband has never been able to touch a dollar of the fortune I hold; he could only spend what I chose to give him from my income. The money itself is mine, and I will punish him for his deceit by leaving him penniless now. I don't care what happens, so that I get away from him forever. I fought against this temptation for weeks, and at last I have yielded. Why should I not yield? I am miserable, I tell you, and I don't care. I am too tired and desperate to care!"

"You shall care!" said Lady Hubert, following her for several paces, as she began to slip

away. "You don't know what you are doing. You must listen to me, Emily!"

"I won't listen," was the quick rashly-flung answer.

"Emily!"

"No, no! Don't try to stop me! I tell you that I am resolved. I shan't even see the prince till the vessel sails to-morrow, at a very early hour. At least, I've implored him not to come near me until then, and I know he will keep his word. There—good-bye."

"Emily!"

Lady Hubert had caught the slender feverish hand again, though it firmly resisted her efforts. And then she spoke words which she knew would have in them an immense forbidding force. They began thus :

"Emily, he is not the Prince Monti. He is an impostor. I swear this to you, and I swear that I will prove hereafter what I say now. He was once my courier when I was traveling in the East. His name is Carlo Campi—he is a mere common courier—think—not a prince at all!"

"I—I don't believe you!" came faintly from her listener's white lips.

"I tell you, Emily, that I can prove every word I say!" cried Lady Hubert, with a despairing energy which would have forced conviction on the most prejudiced hearer.

"I—I don't want—"

"Yes, you do want the truth set before you!" broke in Lady Hubert; "you are not so mad as to refuse to allow it to be done! Come with me into my house for a little while!" She caught Emily in a firmer grasp, and the wretched woman no longer resisted, beyond murmuring: "Let me go—let me go."

But Lady Hubert drew her on, saying gently :

"There, if you feel faint and giddy, as you look, lean on my arm—so—and we will shortly be in-doors. A few people are now watching us, but they have not caught a word of what we have said. If you want to go back home after you have heard more from me, I will see that you quietly get there, as though nothing at all had happened. Come! But if, after hearing everything, you still cling to your mad plan, I— But come, come—we will talk it all over in-doors—"

#### CHAPTER IX.

It was a little past eleven o'clock of that same evening. Lady Hubert sat alone in her drawing-room. Some time before, she had walked home with Emily, a male servant accompanying them both. Bleecker Provost was dining out that evening; it was a dinner given by some friends

of his own sex, who loved both wine and cards, and hence he was wholly ignorant of either his wife's departure or return. Lady Hubert had spared not a single detail in her narration to Emily, who had listened with equal horror and conviction. And now the entire ordeal of the disclosure was ended, a mighty relief following it.

"I have saved her," Lady Hubert thought, as she sat alone in the spacious and still drawing-room. "Let Carlo do what he chooses, now. Let his rage take whatever course it will. I owe him reparation, perhaps. I will give him that. Pah! Carlo! He will go back to Europe inside of a week, with a well-stocked purse of my filling. But, if he prefers to babble, I shall not greatly care. What is all the odium that he can cast upon me, compared with the one exquisite thought that I have saved her—and saved my own soul from the black stain of an inhuman crime?"

The house was very still. All the servants had retired to bed. No one heard a key turn softly in the lock of the street-door. It was the latch-key that Lady Hubert had allowed Carlo to have when she first took possession of the Lafayette abode, and needed his constant services and counsel.

The light in the drawing-room must have guided Carlo to where Lady Hubert was seated, with her back to his advancing figure, while she stared at the red remains of what had been a flashing wood-fire on a big andironed hearth-stone.

She did not hear him until he was within a few paces of her, he had stepped so lightly. Then she gave a great start, as one who listens in a still room to some unaccustomed sound, and rose, turning sharply.

"Carlo!" she said.

"Yes," he answered.

She saw that he was pale as death.

"Do you know why Emily Provost did not meet me to-night?" he asked.

Lady Hubert had not a shadow of fear, unprotected though she was. She could never regard him as anything but a paid creature, the hireling of her own once turbulent impulses. She had despised him for letting her make him Prince Monti, even while she had seen him accept the base masqueraising character.

She had no idea that, during the time he had drawn near to her, he had caught from a side-table a certain Oriental dagger, which was one of the many ornaments the room contained, and had hidden its keen blade behind him in his left hand.

"Do I know why Emily Provost did not meet

you to-night?" she answered, slowly and fearlessly repeating his question. "Yes, I do know."

"Will you tell me?" he said.

His voice was very low.

She saw how pale he looked.

"Will I tell you? Yes. It was because of myself."

"Yourself?"

"Yes. I met her in time. I saved her. I told her who you are. I—"

Those were the last words that she ever spoke.

In the morning, Lady Hubert Averyl was found dead, with the Oriental knife, which had for months rested on one of her drawing-room tables, plunged into her heart. The body reclined in an arm-chair near the white ashes of a spent wood-fire.

Prince Monti's disappearance from New York, just at this particular time, caused a thousand suspicious tongues to declare him the murderer. And yet his disappearance was the sole peculiar part of his hazarded complicity in the crime.

It was true that Lady Hubert had presented him in society, and openly endorsed him as a genuine Italian nobleman. But, for weeks previous to the murder, she had not been on the least terms of intimacy with him. In the turmoil of early investigation, arrest followed arrest; but the assassination, as chronicled at the opening of our story, always remained an unsolved mystery.

Occasionally, during a space of many succeeding months, people were to be found who lamented that the illness of Mrs. Bleecker Provost should have prevented the gain of this lady's testimony. But it was never secured.

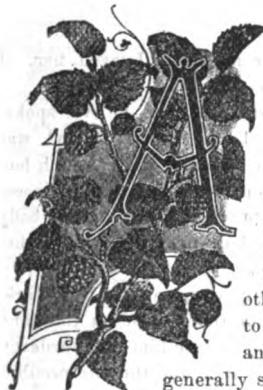
Mrs. Provost had been the intimate friend of Lady Hubert; everyone knew that. But, unfortunately, Mrs. Provost, after a prolonged attack of complete physical exhaustion, had been pronounced by her physicians hopelessly insane, and was consigned to an asylum, where she ultimately died.

Her husband went abroad, after her death. She had died intestate, and for this reason he fell heir to a certain comfortable portion of her property. There is no record that the slightest disaster ever overtook him in his beloved Paris, where he spent a number of idle years.

There is no doubt that many more thorough-paced scoundrels die peaceably in their beds than romance cares to take heed of. But the present history is unfortunately not a romance. When fact and not fancy is dealt with, poetical justice must too often unbind her eyes and destroy her scales.

## JENNIE'S DISTRESSING FAILURES.

BY J. H. CONNELLY.



NDREW DOUGAL, a sturdy Scot and one of the oldest settlers along McDowell's Run, was widely known as a crotchety eccentric man. He professed a remarkable respect for the rights of others, often amounting to a sort of Quixotism, and with it an obstinacy generally stigmatized as "mulsiness" in his insistence upon what he deemed his own rights. When he died, people in all the country around said: "Well, there's an end of old Andy's queer doin's." They were mistaken—his will had yet to be read. When its provisions were made known, the popular comment was "That beats all!"

Mrs. Seamantha Abeel, widow, as she meditatively shoved back her sunbonnet and gently furrowed her scalp with a hairpin, while discussing the situation with her daughter Jane, went so far as to say that she deemed Andrew Dougal's conduct "flighty and onChristian."

"Why," said she, "Squire Clark told me about it himself; and, as executor, he ought to know. The farm was cut in two parts, exactly alike; and to each there was just the same stock and outfit of every kind as there was on the other. The old Simmons place that Dougal bought, last summer, made two homesteads as like as two peas. Then the ownership of the two farms was willed to be settled by tossing up a silver dollar, heads or tails, for choice, by the boys. Did anybody ever hear the like?"

"I hope he's gone where they'll toss him up," exclaimed Jane, spitefully.

"As Squire Clark tells me, John won the choice; and, after he'd made it, he offered to trade with James, if he wasn't satisfied, for a penny to boot; and James said: "No—there's not a penny of difference; and, if I had had choice, I'd have taken the one I've got without knowing why."

"It's the meanest, most provoking thing that

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ever was," complained the girl, in a tone that was almost crying.

"You don't notionate one of 'em no more than t'other, do you, Jennie?"

"No, I don't. You know what I waited for."

"Yes, yes—that's so," assented the older woman, slowly; "but it didn't turn out right, which nobody could have foreseen, not anybody knowing what that contrary old Andy Dougal would up and do. They're both of them good matches—a sight better than anybody else around here, for you, Jennie."

"Laws! mother, don't talk so foolish. I can't marry both of 'em, can I?"

"Why, no, child! Bless me! what an idea!"

"Well, can you tell me, so long as I've got to put up with only one, which is best?"

"I should say," replied Mrs. Abeel, reflectively, "take John, the oldest. It's true, there's only a couple of years' difference between them; but even that is something, and may give him a little more steadiness; though they are both steady boys, and James hasn't got any wild ways about him that ever I heard of."

Jennie Abeel was a pretty girl, and yet a keen physiognomist would have noted in her handsome face the deepening of lines that, in a few years, would stamp it with her mother's shrewd, calculating, selfish, and avaricious expression. Why not? She inherited her mother's character, and the soul is forever chiseling its image on the countenance. Unhappily, neither of the Dougal boys was a physiognomist. They only saw that Jennie was the prettiest girl in the township. For a year, both had been paying attention to her, and she well knew that she was the only cloud that had ever risen on the horizon of their brotherly feeling. Yet they could never bring her to make a choice between them. She did as her mother told her.

"Don't give either of them 'the mitten,' Jennie," said the old woman. "Andrew Dougal is mighty poorly, and can't last longer than the spring break-up comes. When he's gone, it will not be long until you know how his property goes, and then it will be easy for you to decide which you'd rather take. Until then, you better keep them both sort of expectin'."

Mr. Dougal was so obliging as to last no

longer than the spring break-up, but, with what Mrs. Abeel branded as "pure cussedness," had so arranged things, before he left, that Jennie's decision was as difficult as ever.

"I shouldn't wonder," complained the girl, querulously, "if we'd been just a leetle too smart. If I'd taken one of the boys while the old man was alive, maybe he would have felt himself bound to do something more for that one, as a married man; but now all that fat is in the fire."

"There's more than one way of looking at everything, Jennie," argued Mrs. Abeel. "Andrew Dougal might have done as you say; but he was just that crotchety and queer, that nobody could tell beforehand what he would do. Just as like as not, he might have set his face against the match and left his property just the other way. And then where would you have been?"

"That's so," assented Jennie. After a few minutes of silent cogitation, she added, with a toss of her shapely little head: "I don't care. I'm in no hurry. I can wait. And they'll have to, until it seems fittin' for me to make up my mind. We'll wait and see which of them gets along best."

That policy of masterly inactivity, Jennie, conscious of her power, maintained for the better part of another year, with the naturally inevitable result of widening the breach between the rival brothers. They had no open outbreak. They just drifted farther and farther apart, never talking over business and mutual interests amicably as in old times, having no social life together, talking little when they met, and meeting as seldom as possible. Jennie saw all that, but did not care. Her mind was not yet made up as to which was the most eligible match.

At length, however, James gained an advantage. He had an intuitive perception that, if he could attain greater financial prosperity than his brother, the prize would be his, and, without once thinking how unworthy of a true man's love was the girl who could be swayed by such mercenary considerations, he devoted himself to planning and scheming for wealth with such avaricious eagerness as he had never felt before. And the project on which he based his hopes seemed a very promising one. He told her of it, and it caught her fancy too. He would have an oil-well.

The people along McDowell's Run—a small tributary of the Allegheny River—had been rather slow to catch the oil-fever, that wasraging even so near to them as the adjacent county.

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They had heard of men receiving fabulous prices for farms that had almost starved them and their families; of shares in oil companies that yielded gold more easily and abundantly than ever Aladdin's lamp did dinners, of "spouting wells," that poured forth such Pactolian torrents that their owners became millionaires almost before they had time to realize that they had ceased to be paupers. Still, McDowell's Run harbored a cold distrust of it all. James Dougal was probably the earliest believer in the infinite possibilities supposably almost within his grasp, and he talked with such fiery earnestness about them to Jennie that he soon made a convert of her.

"You will see," he assured her, "that within six months I'll have a million. Why shouldn't there be just as much oil here as anywhere else? Of course there is. And we won't live here. We'll go to Pittsburgh and have a fine house; I don't care if it costs as much as five thousand dollars. And we'll go to New York and everywhere, and live like kings. There will we nothing too good for us."

Under such pressure, it was not strange that Jennie's manner toward the elder brother very perceptibly cooled. She asked him, one evening, why he did not "bore for oil"? He replied, guardedly, that he had been thinking about it, but did not see his way clear to it yet—was not fully convinced that it would be a prudent thing to do.

"What a slow old poke he is, to be sure," thought Jennie. "He's been only 'thinking about it,' and here James has been actually talking about it, and determined on it, for two months." She was quite strongly impressed with the idea that James would have to be the man of her choice; still, she was not rash. With feminine adroitness, she evaded a positive promise that she would be his wife; but, at the same time, so treated him that he felt sure of winning her. Her coldness toward John gave him unbounded encouragement. Neither he nor she fathomed John's strong, determined, and reticent nature. It would have astonished them to know that he had already brought there, at considerable expense, two experts to view the country and give their opinions, from its degree of conformity to the condition of known oil-producing territory, as to the success likely to attend boring for oil on his farm.

James went on talking about an oil-well, not only to Jennie, but to everybody who would listen, until he was in very great degree responsible for a change that sprang up in popular sentiment on the subject. With a suddenness

that startled him, the former apathy of the community, with reference to petroleum, was replaced by a raging oil-fever. Cold skepticism was swept away by a wave of eager credulity. Nothing was too wildly improbable for belief—except that everybody who owned ground enough to bore a well was not at once going to become a *Crœsus*. The landless began scheming for millions to be made out of companies, to operate with other people's money on other people's land. James found it high time to bestir himself, if he would not be left behind in the race. But how to get the money to pay for boring his well troubled him much. What would it cost? Nobody could tell him. Nobody could even guess how deep the precious stores of oil might lie. He might strike them at six hundred feet, or possibly at not less than twenty-five hundred, and the contingencies of the well caving in, the jamming and losing of tools, and other mischances, all infinitely more serious and costly then than now, were not to be contemplated without apprehension except by those with large capital.

James could not, by mortgaging his farm, obtain much more than one-third of the sum that he was assured would be absolutely necessary. And nobody wanted to lend money. Everybody who had any seemed to have some project for speculating in oil. The most exasperating disappointment he suffered was when he called on his father's old friend, Squire Clark, for help.

"If you had only come to me yesterday," said the worthy old gentleman, "I would have let you have the sum you want, James, just to help you; though, as you know, your farm is not worth more than half so much. 'Oil-land'?—well, possibly; and maybe not. It's hard to say what is two thousand feet underground. But that's neither here nor there in this matter, now. I can't let you have the money, because I have already, only last night, lent every dollar I could spare for investment, to another man who is going to bore for oil."

James was so much disgusted that he did not even think to ask who the more lucky borrower was. What did he care who bored for oil, if he could not? But he was destined to learn very soon, and to care a great deal. As a last resort, he forced himself, much as he disliked to do so, to go to his brother and ask him to lend his name on a joint note to enable him to get the money he required.

"You are too late, James," was John's reply. "Only yesterday I mortgaged my farm to Squire Clark, for money to put in with Sam Chase, the

well-digger, for a well. Chase puts in an equal amount, and his experience and tools to boot, and our partnership prevents my doing what you want."

"I think you might have told me you intended to bore for oil."

"Why? You did not tell me that you thought of it."

"I have just done so."

"Yes, when you couldn't raise the money without my help."

"I couldn't, eh? Well I'll show you that I can. I'll get the money somewhere, and I'm going ahead with my well anyway."

"Had you not better wait a little while and see how ours turns out? If we strike oil, it will be easy for you to get all the capital you want. And, if we do not, you will be saved from squandering your money foolishly."

"You needn't worry about my squandering my money. I know what I'm going to do."

The brothers parted in an ill-humor, and James carried away with him a conviction that John's chief object in advising him to wait was that he might himself be the first to get rich, and so win Jennie. And now hope began singing a syren song to unlucky James. She told him that he had far over-estimated the cost of a well. He thought over all the stories he had ever heard of shallow wells, and closed his ears to information about the much more numerous very deep ones. His well, he determined, should be not only one of the best, but of the shallowest. Half as much money as he had before figured upon would be ample.

But the sum he eventually got, under very hard conditions, was considerably below that modest limit. Still, he thought, he would make it do. The man who advanced it was a cold-blooded, grasping, merciless money-lender, named David Bissell, who, not content with a mortgage on the farm, insisted upon having filed, in escrow, a bill of sale for it and all upon it, to be turned over to him at once in case of James's failure in punctual repayment.

The money in hand, James pushed his operations with feverish energy. Stimulated by promise of a liberal bonus if oil were reached within two months, the well-borer he had engaged kept his machinery going day and night; but, at the end of that period, there was no sign of oil. Then James extended the time, offering a still larger bonus if oil were reached in a month more, when Bissell's note would be presented for payment; and the diggers worked, if possible, harder than ever.

All was in vain. The fourth "sand-rock"

had been pierced, and still there was not a sign to encourage hope. The well-borer, who shared James's confidence, would have continued the work on credit, if Bissell would have granted an extension; but it was not in the money-lender's nature to give anything, even time. Secretly, this Shylock had hoped for and expected just the present condition of affairs; for he also believed that oil would be struck on James Dougal's farm, and was determined to become the owner of the well at as little cost as possible. So, at the earliest moment the law would allow, he entered into possession, turning James out on the world—penniless, homeless, and hopeless.

John would have helped his brother if he could, but was powerless; for he himself seemed to be on the verge of ruin. His well, though nearly two hundred feet deeper than James's, was still a "dust-hole," and the wiseacres were all saying "I told you so." Fortunately, Sam Chase had a mule-like obstinacy about sticking to anything he undertook. Having affirmed that there was oil to be got there, he now swore that he would have it "if he had to bore so far that the hole would open in China."

So the squeak, rattle, and thug of the boring-machinery still went on at John's well, and also at James's, under Bissell's control; but poor James was no longer within hearing of them—he had turned his back on McDowell's Run. The night after utter ruin overtook him, he called on Jennie Abeel, with a foolish hope in his heart that she would sympathize with and console him, never thinking how utterly at variance such conduct would be with the intelligent opinion he had before formed concerning the essential of her successful wooing. Bad news flies fast. She had already been informed that he was beggared, and "governed herself accordingly."

She was quite surprised when he spoke of going away somewhere to make a fortune and coming back, by-and-by, to claim her hand. Really, she said, she did not know that she had ever given him any reason to speak in such a manner. Certainly, she had never promised to be his wife; if he thought so, it was a delusion almost as wild as his well-digging. Of course, she was sorry for him—oh, yes; but she could not be expected to marry everybody she was sorry for. As a friend, she would always be glad to hear of his success; but it was idle to think of any other relation between them, and so forth and so on, until poor James got up and went away, with a dull dazed sense of extreme loneliness and misery in his heart. He did not try bidding good-bye to anybody

else, but buried himself promptly in the sooty shades of Pittsburgh, where he found rough employment, and worked industriously and uncomplainingly, trying to forget all his brief bright dreams of fortune and love.

One evening, he learned by a paragraph in the "Chronicle" that Chase & Dougal, at McDowell's Run, had struck "a three-hundred-barrel flowing well." He could not sleep that night, he was so busy building castles in the air. John now could, and surely would, help him to buy back his farm from Bissell, and then—

But, when he got home to McDowell's Run, the foundation was speedily knocked out from under all the gorgeous castles in the air which he had built on that word "then." Bissell too, he then learned for the first time, was boring for oil in the hole he had started; and, since John's well had proved a success, he valued that property higher than his hopes of heaven—in which he was probably right, if the popular opinion of him were correct.

"I suppose," James said to his brother, "now that you've got rich, you'll be marrying Jennie Abeel."

"No," replied John, quietly but emphatically; "I have got over all that foolishness; for I have learned to value her at her real worth. I saw that she gave me 'the cold shoulder' when she thought you about to be rich. When you were ruined, she herself told how she had given you 'the sack,' and I heard of it. The very day after we struck oil, she sought an occasion to meet me and urge me to resume my visits, which she had discouraged before. I am sorry—deeply sorry, James—that so unworthy an influence ever came between us. And, as for my marrying her—no, not if she owned the well and I hadn't a dollar!"

Though all his hopes were shattered, James could not tear himself away and go back to Pittsburgh. He found a fascination in the pain of staying at McDowell's Run, such as nervous people often find in poking a hollow tooth, even though they know that they will make it ache. John and his partner offered him a good position; but he refused it. The old saw-mill on the Run had been enlarged and fitted with new machinery for making oil-barrels. In it, he found employment at fair wages; and there, one day, the tidings reached him that Bissell had struck a flowing vein of oil at least equal to Chase & Dougal's. The next news he heard was that Jennie Abeel was "setting her cap" for Bissell. He began to think that John had been right in his estimate of the young woman;

for certainly nothing but the basest considerations of selfish interest would have tempted any girl to show favor to such a repulsive and universally detested wretch as Bissell.

Two or three months passed, and the important local event on the tapis was the marriage of Bissell and Jennie; the day was set, and elaborate preparations were being made.

Meanwhile, winter had worn away and spring had come. With the melting of the snow came the inevitable freshet that annually raises the Allegheny River from the dimensions of a fairly respectable stream to the turbulence and terror of a mighty torrent. McDowell's Run played a very considerable part in that change of the river's character every year, but on this occasion quite outdid itself in the energy of its proceedings: from a shallow brook, it became, in a few hours, a flood that covered all the valley.

At the saw-mill, there were lively fears that the dam would give way. A sheet of turbid water already poured over the top of it, and débris, swept down from above, lodged against it in perilous masses. An eddy carried from the "boom" near the mill several large and valuable logs, and bore them toward the dam. James Dougal went out in a skiff, to steer them back to place. Night had fallen, the rain had stopped, and the moon shone out so broad and clear that the light was almost that of day.

James had secured three of the straying logs, though with much difficulty and not a little danger, and was struggling with a fourth—a big refractory fellow—when, chancing to look up the stream, he saw a sight that made his hair stand on end: A dark wall of water, stretching clear across the valley, foam-crested and crowned with a confused mass of timbers, portions of fences, fragments of bridges, wrecks of houses, and uprooted trees, was rushing down toward him with a terrifying low roar. It came with the speed of a race-horse, as if eager to swallow him. Before he could move to make his escape, it had leaped upon him, his skiff was overturned, and he found himself in the icy water, hurled along with frightful velocity, battling for life amid the floating wrecks that surrounded and successively attacked him.

His terrible danger nerved him to almost superhuman exertions. Fortunately, he retained his self-possession and could swim well; so he managed, notwithstanding the fearful buffettings he received, to keep afloat. But the thought flashed upon him: "When this stuff jams, at the dam, I shall be crushed like a bubble." Turning to see how far away he was, and thinking of a desperate effort to dive under the mass

that bore down upon him, he was amazed to see that the mill-lights were far up the current. The dam had given way like the one further up the Run, whence that mountain of ruins had come. And now, a mightier and swifter wall of advancing, destroying water—a very death-wave—the flood filled all the valley, and dashed headlong toward the river, carrying him with it. It seemed hardly worth while to resist the inevitable fate before him.

The tall derricks at his brother's and Bissell's wells stood out clearly as he darted by them. They were half submerged, and the light frame buildings that had stood near were gone.

Somewhere down-stream he could hear a man's voice shouting:

"Help! Help!"

The speed of the current began to slacken as the flood spread out over some broad meadows, and James found himself going around and around in a great circle. He had been carried into a wide and shallow eddy. Something with regular outlines floated by his side and jostled him. At the first sight he was appalled, for he thought it looked like a coffin; but a second glance reassured him. It was his own skiff, drifting bottom up. He loosed his hold of the timber to which he had been clinging, and let himself drop; he found that the water was only a little above his waist, and, where he stood, the current was not very strong. He caught the little boat, and, towing it, waded to where the water was only knee-deep, and still, as he was on an almost level meadow, a long distance from dry land.

Away down the stream, farther off and fainter than before, came again that pitiful cry:

"Help! Help!"

The young man was almost exhausted and benumbed with cold, but it was not in his nature to deny response to that appeal.

As quickly as possible, he managed, by rocking the skiff from side to side, to throw most of the water out of it, and then climbed in. The oars were gone, but he found a piece of board that he could use as a paddle, and at once put out into the current, heading down-stream in the direction from which came the increasing shrieks of:

"Help! Help!"

In a little while, he discovered that those cries came from amid a floating tree-top, that seemed temporarily stationary—anchored, doubtless, by its huge ragged root. Forcing the boat in among the branches, at imminent risk of being upset, he eventually got close enough to make out clearly the figure and face of the one man

whom he hated more than all others, David Bissell.

"It's you, is it? Well, if I'd known it, I wouldn't have come," he exclaimed, in disgust.

"Oh! don't say so, James. Do, for the love of heaven, take me away from here. Oh, James! Dear James! Good James! Save me! If you don't, I shall be drowned."

"I hardly think so, unless the devil is in a mighty special hurry for you. Your proper destiny, Dave Bissell, is to be hanged."

"How can you have the heart, James, to jest in such an awful moment? Oh! you are cruel to keep me in this torturing suspense. For heaven's sake, help me. What have I ever done, that you should wish to see me die the death of a blind puppy?"

"What have you done? Why, you have robbed me of all I had in the world. When my brother tried to buy back my property from you, at a price that ought to have satisfied even a shark like you, you laughed at him—as I do at you now."

"No! No! I didn't rob you. I had no hard feelings toward you. That was all in the way of business. And I'll make it all right. I'll pay you well, if you'll set me on dry land. I can't swim a stroke, and oh! James, I'm not fit to die."

"There's some comfort in that reflection—to me."

"I'll give you a hundred dollars, if you will set me ashore."

"No."

"Five hundred."

"No."

"A thousand."

"No."

"Oh! James, don't rob me. What will you take, and set me ashore?"

"That which justly belongs to me, neither more nor less."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll take back my farm upon repayments of the money I borrowed from you, and return of all you have actually invested in the well since, with legal interest in the well only."

"Oh! James, I can't agree to that. It would break my heart to lose that well."

"All right; that's the toll on this ferry. And, as the stream is rising, and this tree liable to free itself and turn over at any minute, it is not safe for me to stay here any longer waiting for a passenger. I'm going home, and you can go—you know where."

Bissell, as cowardly as he was avaricious, when he saw James start as if to leave him,

shrieked with affright, and in agony pleaded for better terms, but in vain.

"No," replied the young man. "You squeezed me very hard in the way of business, and now I'm going to squeeze you in the way of business, strictly. I'm in the ferry business now, and you needn't patronize me if you don't want to."

Then Bissell promised to make out a written agreement to James's terms as soon as he got ashore; but the high-priced ferrymen would not trust him so far, and produced a small account-book and pencil, telling him to put it down where he was. The old usurer protested that there was not light enough for him to write, that his fingers were too stiff with cold, that he dared not loosen a finger from the bough to which he was clinging. Again James started to leave him, and just then the tree gave an ominous heave and lurch which so terrified the cowardly wretch that even his avarice gave way, and at length, with trembling fingers and sobbing in mingled agony and fright, he wrote as James dictated, putting the agreement into good legal form and signing it. Then James took him into the boat and safely to shore.

Of course, the old rascal subsequently sought to repudiate the agreement, and it was carried into court; but there Sam Black, the famous Pittsburgh lawyer, easily won a verdict in James's favor from his friends and neighbors. Before that occurred, however, Jennie Abee, believing Bissell the richest man on McDowell's Run, and not doubting that he would retain possession of James Dougal's well, married him. It was a severe blow to her when James's rights were affirmed by the court, and her husband was relegated to a secondary position in the field of local financial magnates; but a harder one was in store for her. Within six months, urged by his grasping avarice to retake from fortune all he had lost, and with good interest, Bissell involved himself in some disastrous oil-speculating, and, to escape his creditors, ran away with a mere remnant of his former wealth, deserting Jennie, who has never since heard of him. She has got to look painfully like her mother, and deems herself the most ill-used woman in the world. Five or six years after Bissell left her, she obtained a divorce from him, on the ground of abandonment, and made a desperate effort to capture one or the other of her old suitors, the rich and prosperous Dougal brothers; the attempt was a sad failure, and, as she looks now, nobody would be likely to marry her. But both John and James have been happily wedded to worthy girls who never schemed as she had done to win them.